Save My Game

Challenging Knowledgeable Players

By Jason Nelson-Brown

This column provides advice for DMs whose campaigns are in trouble. Do your players constantly bicker or complain about issues both inside and outside of the main campaign action? Do your best ideas fall flat? Have you set up a situation that you now wish you hadn't? Worry no more, because Jason Nelson-Brown has the answers to save your game!

Challenges for Jaded Players

This installment of *Save My Game* continues to examine what happens when players bring out-of-character knowledge into the game. What's a DM to do when player knowledge of the *Monster Manual* takes all the surprise out of encounters?

Problem: Keeping the Element of Surprise in Your Game

My players have memorized the Monster Manual, *so they recognize every monster I throw at them. How can I provide surprises and challenges for them without making them feel cheated out of using their knowledge?* -- **Maggie at Wizards of the Coast**

You can always find an interesting, weird, and surprising monster to spring on your party, but unfamiliarity alone isn't enough to make the encounter a challenge if the creature just isn't tough enough to mix it up with your PCs. Conversely, a straightforward, unsurprising encounter can be a serious test. Sometimes the tactics that work are not a surprise because everyone knows darn well that they are at the top of the option list, but the encounter is a satisfying challenge anyway. A red dragon is perhaps the most stereotypical of all **D&D** monsters, but no one would deny that facing one down in mortal combat is a challenge.

One obvious suggestion for adding the element of surprise to an encounter is to use creative spellcasting (especially high-level spells) to alter or boost enemy capabilities. Another is to make use of new monsters from any of a zillion sources, or create NPCs with new magic items and prestige classes. Another good option is to apply templates from the core books, or the various supplements that Wizards has produced (just take a look at our *Elite Opponents* archives at, or the new *Creature Incarnations* column -- Coming Soon), or even **Dragon** Magazine.

But DMing style and strategy can also play a big role in keeping players on their toes. Below are a few suggestions for making encounters both surprising and challenging for players who memorize the books. For the most part, they involve only the core books, though other books can also provide plenty of ideas. If you use these concepts to beef up the opposition, however, be sure to increase the CR/EL of your creatures and encounters accordingly to avoid overwhelming (or under-rewarding) your PCs.

Solution 1: Use Different Equipment

Don't just equip your monsters and NPCs with the standard gear. Better armor and weapons -- especially a mix of reach, close-combat, and ranged weapons -- can vastly improve their combat effectiveness while staying nice and legal. PCs often carry more than one type of weapon, so why shouldn't your monsters?

Consider your monsters' gear carefully prior to each encounter. For example, giants throwing rocks is the stuff of classic **D&D**, but are rocks really better than appropriately sized composite longbows or slings? And why shouldn't they have access to masterwork weapons or heavy armor, just like PCs do?

In some cases, logistics may seem to present a barrier to improving a monster's equipment. For example, you might wonder who's making all these items for the monsters. For the most part, however, buying and selling weapons, armor, and magic is pretty easy in the **D&D** world. Arms dealers don't usually care who's good or bad as long as they get paid. And why wouldn't evil races have their own "in-house" experts maintaining forges and armories, or trade with other evil races or cultures that do?

Specialty items do cost money, no matter who commissions them. But giants and other monsters have treasure, don't they? Some monsters may collect gold for the sake of collecting, like a dragon does, but wouldn't reasonably intelligent creatures think about sacrificing some of their shiny-brights for better armament?

Solution 2: Use Nonstandard Feat Selections

A lot of monsters come preloaded with handy feats such as Alertness and Improved Initiative. Except for racial bonus feats, however, individual monsters are free to choose any feats they wish, just like PCs are. So if you wish, you can reshuffle their feats a bit to tailor your monsters to their equipment or their situations.

You can find plenty of options for feat restructuring just within the core rulebooks, so look for feats tailored to a monster's particular fighting style. For example, a monster with great attack rolls could have Combat Expertise (if it normally faces a lot of foes) or Power Attack (if it has a lot of attacks per round), or both. Big creatures could specialize in tripping (especially with reach weapons), bull rush, and other attacks that bring their size advantage into play. A creature with spell-like abilities should try to Empower or Quicken those if possible, and it can use Skill Focus (Concentration) or Combat Casting to ensure that it always succeeds in casting defensively.

You can get even more feat options from supplements that focus on the type of monster in question, such as *Libris Mortis* for undead, *Draconomicon* for big creatures (not just dragons), or the *Planar Handbook* for extraplanar creatures. You could also add bonus feats that emulate effects you want. For example, you could give Improved Teamwork (+4 on flanking attacks) to pack attackers such as wolves, or Spring Attack to leaping predators such as leopards.

Solution 3: Use Terrain to Your Advantage

Look at the special terrain rules in the *Dungeon Master's Guide,* as well as *Frostburn, Sandstorm,* and the other terrain books. You can plan some interesting encounters around unusual terrain features that are suited to the enemy and the way it fights. Such a tactic forces PCs to overcome natural obstacles and may prevent them from taking advantage of known monster weaknesses for a while.

To plan such an encounter, think about the movement options of the creature you plan to use and how it can use position to stymie the party. Don't have flying creatures land and enter melee except as a last resort. Instead, have the creature snatch up a PC and fly away with him, thereby forcing the party to focus (at least temporarily) on rescue ahead of victory. Give aquatic creatures enough room not only to swim normally, but also to bull rush or grapple enemies into the water. If your monster can burrow or climb, think three-dimensionally about the space in and around the dungeon corridors where the PCs walk. Finally, use cover and concealment to complicate your encounters, and ruthlessly enforce any and all penalties relating to position, movement, or visibility.

Solution 4: Use Tactical Thinking

Not every monster is a tactical genius, but most are basically aware of their own abilities and shortcomings, and they instinctively know how to fight in ways that maximize their advantages and minimize their vulnerabilities. A wise enemy flees from a fight in which the conditions are unfavorable and returns when it can set the rules of engagement, choose a battleground that is advantageous for itself and inconvenient for the opponents, and prepare for combat with all the resources at its disposal. Even animals don't necessarily fight to the death or attack an obviously greater threat. Instead, they try to pick off scouts or stragglers, attack mounts rather than the iron-shod warriors on their backs, and harass or menace PCs rather than starting an open battle.

Solution 5: Use Teamwork

The teamwork benefits presented in *Dungeon Master's Guide II* offer another interesting option for creating surprising encounters. If you have multiple monsters that often work together, you can select teamwork tactics that can stymie the characters in your campaign -- or at least provide their foes with an advantage. Including even low-level bards, clerics, or marshals (from the *Miniatures Handbook*) in enemy forces to rally, exhort, and bless groups of enemies, or uniting a group of foes with a companion spirit (see *Dungeon Master's Guide II*), can also greatly boost the effectiveness of your monster hordes. Even simpler tactics for using teamwork were described in an earlier column about hitting opponents with high Armor Class values. Use feats such as Swarmfighting for multiple small creatures, and coordinate attacks with bull rushes to provoke attacks of opportunity or push characters into pits or other hazards. Likewise, your monsters can trip foes to give allies a better chance of hitting them, and also force the opponents to provoke attacks of opportunity just to stand up again.

When designing complex encounters, don't neglect the possibility of reinforcements. If the fight takes place in an inhabited area, the noise of combat may draw other monsters as well -- either random predators or allies of the enemy who have come to lend a hand. Bad guys generally have enough sense to set up signals for rallying the troops, so a fight against a few guards could easily become a large-scale battle if one of them has time to ring the gong and bring the rest of the regiment running. When such possibilities exist, give some thought to response time, the order in which allies will arrive, and what preparations (such as spellcasting) they can make before they appear at the scene.

Summary

Your players won't feel cheated out of their hard-earned expertise if you take the fight to them with a little creativity. It's even okay to fudge die rolls once in a while if a fight is turning out to be too easy, but it's more satisfying for everyone involved if the challenge stems from inventiveness rather than just manipulation. Heck, your players may even appreciate the fact that the bad guys aren't just popping out of the official *Monster Manual* cloning vats, and that they have to exercise their brains a little more. Obviously they enjoy tactical thinking, since they've spent so much time memorizing monsters and figuring out the standards. By altering the monsters and the situations within the legal limits, you're just giving them more food for thought and whetting their appetite for the next challenge.

About the Author

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